

Theatre: 'The Best Man' Arrives

Political Play by Gore Vidal at Morosco

By BROOKS ATKINSON

COMING from a political family, Gore Vidal knows which skeleton to stow away in which closet.

"The Best Man," which opened at the Morosco last evening, is a political melodrama that comes close enough to the truth to be both comic and exciting; and an excellent cast, under Joseph Anthony's shrewd direction, acts it with a whoop and a holler in the style of popular theatre.

It is set in some Philadelphia hotel rooms during a Presidential convention in the summer of 1960—a date that now belongs to future, although it will be past time before people stop laughing at "The Best Man." All that happens, really, is that a scrupulous candidate for the nomination tangles with an unscrupulous candidate. The great issue is whether the scrupulous candidate will descend to the level of the unscrupulous candidate and, in self-defense, engage in character assassination.

Since "The Best Man" is melodrama, it would probably be unscrupulous for this column to announce the winner. Mr. Vidal is entitled to his professional secrets. But it would also be unscrupulous for this column to refrain from reporting that Mr. Vidal knows how to put together a plot that is both amusing and engrossing. As clients of "Visit to a Small Planet" remember, he has a wonderful sense of humor and knows how to write lines that are explosively comic. Although the material of "The Best Man" inevitably centers on the old razzle-dazzle of a political convention, Mr. Vidal keeps it fresh by having a mind of his own.

During the preliminary tour, he has refused to identify the persons of the play. It is true that none of them coincides with the historical record, and that all of them are composite men. But one of the pleasures of "The Best Man" is the sardonic consistency with which it recalls characteristics of current politicians—the fastidiousness and wit of Adlai Stevenson, the belligerent political guile of Harry Truman, Richard Nixon's soap-opera with wife and dog to convince the country of his honesty. There is even a line that includes Jack Kennedy: "Catholics are a big thing this year," says one of Mr. Vidal's deep thinkers who hopes to write a slate that will appeal to everybody.

Everyone on the stage has conspired with Mr. Vidal to



Lee Tracy, left, and Melvyn Douglas in "The Best Man"

The Cast

THE BEST MAN, a play by Gore Vidal. Staged by Joseph Anthony; produced by the Playwrights Company; associate producer, Lyn Austin; scenery and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Theoni V. Aldredge; production stage manager, Bill Ross. At the Morosco Theatre, 217 West Forty-fifth Street.

Dick Jensen.....	Karl Weber
First Reporter.....	Howard Fischer
William Russell.....	Melvyn Douglas
Mike.....	Martin Fried
Second Reporter.....	Tony Bickley
Third Reporter.....	Barbara Berjer
Fourth Reporter.....	Tom McDermott
Alice Russell.....	Leora Dana
Assistant to Dick Jensen.....	Ruth Maynard
Mrs. Gamadge.....	Ruth McDevitt
Arthur Hockstader.....	Lee Tracy
Mabel Cantwell.....	Kathleen Maguire
Bill Blades.....	Joseph Sullivan
Joseph Cantwell.....	Frank Lovejoy
Senator Carlin.....	Gordon B. Clarke
Dr. Artinian.....	Hugh Franklin
Sheldon Marcus.....	Graham Jarvis

get "The Best Man" acted boldly, in the broad style of a political poster. Having played thinly disguised versions of Stalin and Harding, Melvyn Douglas, with a minimum of make-up, is now playing—well, no one who can be positively identified. Perhaps he is playing Melvyn Douglas; at least, that is the liberal he most closely resembles. For he is likable, forceful and humorous; he has the presence of an uncommonly able actor.

As the rival candidate, Frank Lovejoy gives an extraordinary portrait of a bigot and charlatan who believes his own propaganda. There is something horribly plausible about his ethical obtuseness. Lee Tracy, benevolently white-haired, gives a bland and jovial characterization of an aging President who relishes the rough-and-tumble of a rousing political battle.

The secondary parts are also

well-played. Leora Dana as the beautiful, well-bred wife to the candidate of personal scruple; Kathleen Maguire as the more common of the two wives — aggressively banal; Ruth McDevitt, squealing and bumbling around as a national committeewoman; Gordon B. Clarke as a hack Senator; Graham Jarvis as a civilian whose intellectual reactions are sluggish; any number of desperate secretaries and insolent journalists — they are all bouncy and entertaining.

Give Jo Mielziner a political convention to design (he did "The Gang's All Here") and he knows how to capture the stereotyped luxury of hotel suites and the squalor of the night when the delegates are balloting. It is all here in Mr. Vidal's breezy melodrama, which is also civilized. For Mr. Vidal draws no moral. Coming from a political family, he does not feel sanctimonious.